TABLE TENNIS QUEEN
IN LIVING MEMORY

Pak Yong Sun
(b. August 22, 1956 –
d. July 14, 1987)

HIGHLIGHTS

Third place in the women's singles, the 1st Asian Table Tennis Championships 1972

First place in the women's singles, women's doubles and mixed doubles, the All-India Table Tennis Championships 1972

Second place in the women's team and first place in the women's doubles, the 1st Table Tennis Invitation Tournament for Friendship of Three Continents 1973

First place in the women's singles, the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships 1975

First place in the women's singles, the 22nd Yugoslavian International Table Tennis Championships 1976

First place in both the women's singles and the women's doubles, the 19th Scandinavian International Table Tennis Championships 1976

First place in the women's singles, the 34th World Table Tennis Championships 1977

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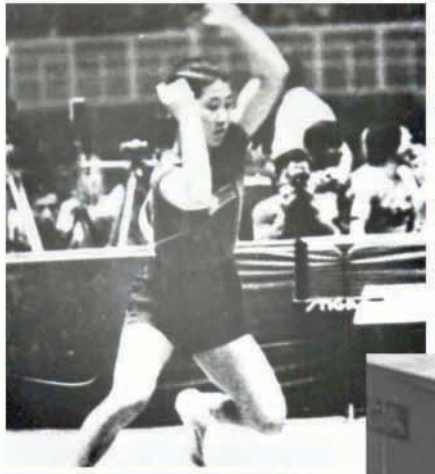
Pak and her house during her days at the then Namsa Middle School, Sakju County.

Coach Kim Hui Jin.

Coaches and sportspersons of the then February 8 Sports Club which Pak belonged to.



Pak is awarded a gold medal and trophy for her win at the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships.

Premier of India Indira Gandhi congratulates Pak.

The gold medal, crown and band Pak received at the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships.

Crowds turn out to the airport and streets spanning dozens of kilometres to accord warm congratulations to Pak.

Pak defends her championship at the 34th World Table Tennis Championships, and wins another gold medal.

Pak enjoys enthusiastic cheers of the Pyongyangites.

Pak expresses her thanks for the title of Labour Hero of the DPRK in November 1985.

The tomb of Pak at the Patriotic Martyrs Cemetery.

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DPRK Labour Hero and People's Athlete Pak Yong Sun (August 22, 1956–July 14, 1987) was a twice world table tennis champion, winning 37 medals including 15 golds during her career.

Bronze Medal and the Feeling of Shame

The sky outside the plane was clean and bright. Pak Yong Sun, however, was dispirited on her way home from the 1st Asian Table Tennis Championships, where she had finished third again.

The plane was flying southward through the sky. As she looked out of the window with a guilty mind, the blue sky spread endlessly before her eyes, and the plane seemed to be at standstill. She was anxious to return home as soon as possible to do more training so as to win first place next time. Raising her body from the seat with eagerness she looked down under the plane flying 10 000 metres high in the sky. The white cauliflower clouds were hanging under it.

Suddenly, the plane began to nose down through the grey clouds, and Yong Sun soon saw the Amnok River. Her face brightened; she seemed to see her respected teachers, dear friends and beloved parents. Among them the image of Ri Ja Chong came first. It immediately removed her depression. The generous and broadminded instructor seemed glad at her winning third place in the international competition at the age of 15 as it was a great success unparalleled to that of winning third place at a domestic contest.

And this time a stern look of Kim Kuk Jin, chairman of the Children's Union of Pak's school, arose before her eyes. His thin face magnified, his eyes piercing her and scolding, "Another bronze medal? And that in the children's class? How dare you return home with such a face?" Kim used to say such words sulkily whenever she won third place at county or provincial games as well as at national contests.

I swear he would talk bluntly this time too, Pak thought. Thinking of Kuk Jin, she dropped her big, bright eyes unawares. *He's right. How could I take off in Pyongyang Airport bearing a bronze medal instead of a gold medal?*

Her coach Hwang Kon Dong who was sitting next found her in extreme anxiety and asked her in surprise, "Yong Sun, what's up? Are you airsick?"

Pak replied almost tearfully, "You know, Hwang, I'm ashamed to return with a bronze medal."

Wearing an absurd smile, Hwang said, "Well, I thought a serious matter had happened to you. You know the chairman of the Asian Table Tennis Union who is the president of the Japanese Table Tennis Association spoke highly of you. He is sure you will emerge as Asian champion. Try hard, and you'll

get it. You may rest assured."

"I couldn't keep my head up, though."

"Take it easy. Brace yourself up. The plane has now landed. Stand up, let's get off."

But Pak was reluctant to raise her body. Hwang got off the plane with her in the last turn, almost pulling her. Luckily, there were only a few people out to receive them. Hwang and Pak arrived at the sports club along with the vice director of the club in charge of technical affairs who had come to the airport to meet them.

When they entered the office of the director of the club, he, a tall man with the elongated face, said with emotion, blinking his eyes, "The great leader Comrade Kim Jong Il visited our table tennis training ground some time ago. Meeting the players and coaches he asked about the result of your match. Hearing you had won third place, the leader said that as you're recognized as a promising paddler, we should train you well to be an Asian and world champion. Then he looked around the table tennis training hall, earnestly saying that he would solve all problems arising in training. He asked us to train harder. Several days later he personally solved all the problems. If you go to the hall, you can see it with your own eyes. Go and see."

Hwang and Pak were filled with deep emotion. At once, they went to the hall. It was refurbished with new tables and

other equipment and they could hardly find any old things.

That night Pak could not get to sleep for her thrilling heart. She thought over again how to become a best player. She set her teeth and made a determination to train harder counting every minute.

Pak actually overcame difficult moments of intense training. There came a new change in her technical development. She resolved to make the drive her powerful weapon and forte this time which she had honed under the guidance of Ri Ja Chong from her schooldays.

After filling the basket with 80 or 100 balls she drove back the balls to the last without stopping. When she was nearly finished, the balls didn't pass to the opposite side correctly, for her hand was shaking. Then, Hwang cried sharply, "They were powerless drives. You might be exposed to counterstrike that way. Cheer up to the end of round five. You should keep the same posture to the last ball."

Hwang knew Pak lacked fortitude and perseverance. So he made sure that she had 30- or 100-m run 10 to 20 times twice or thrice a week. He also made her run 8 kilometres and exercise dumbbell, rope jumping and horizontal bar while pushing ahead with the training of hard drive. With his slim build, sharp eyes, straight nose and frowning face he made exact demands on her without mercy.

Still a teenager, Pak, however, staunchly endured the

training of hard drive like grown-up players. Hwang was afraid he was making a mistake by driving her too hard regardless of her preparedness. Finally he decided the hard task might destroy her physically. One hundred balls were too much for her to bear, he thought, and called, "Stop now! So much for today. Have some free exercise."

"No, Hwang, I am still strong. Try 50 balls more," she suggested. Actually she did 150 balls.

"Satisfied?" Hwang asked, putting his bat on the table. Soaked with perspiration she mumbled, "Sorry, Hwang. You've had trouble for me."

"That's OK. I can do anything if it is helpful to your success."

"Well, if so could you do me one favour?"

"With pleasure."

"Please let me participate in the senior-class competitions next year."

"Unacceptable. It is impossible to jump over to the senior class, not junior. There are big gaps between the skill levels, so I'm afraid you might lose your confidence and be depressed if you lose one game after another."

"I know, Hwang. But I won't give up."

As he well knew her matchless unyielding spirit and the spirit of exertion, Hwang was pleased at Pak's suggestion inwardly. He was convinced that if he put her in the senior

group and gave more training there would be a greater success. So he supported her proposal.

"Well, I agree. Sports is irrelevant to the age and the length of career. If you want to go up to the senior group, you have to rank in the top three in the coming junior-class competition. Then I'll have a say in submitting your proposal to my senior officials, and the association may approve your opinion."

"I see," Pak said as confidently as ever.

In September that year she, the youngest player in the junior class, took third place at the national championships as she had promised. Immediately, Hwang submitted Pak's application for the senior class, and it was approved by the sports club and the association.

That night Yong Sun could hardly get to sleep with her satisfaction that she was able to participate in the senior class next time as she had wished. She was pleased because she had realized her goal and, more importantly, came to have chances to challenge Pak Yong Ok and O Yong Suk who had been her rivals in her school days.

When Pak Yong Sun appeared at the senior-class table-tennis match of the Mangyongdae Prize Games, Pak Yong Ok and O Yong Suk were both surprised and delighted. They had all grown up in the table-tennis circle of the Namsa Middle School, Chongsong Workers' District, Sakju County. They were glad, proud that they were now all members of profes-

sional sports clubs to enter for contests in senior-class games as former pupils of table-tennis coach Ri Ja Chong.

Nevertheless, Pak Yong Ok felt uneasy looking at Yong Sun. Because she would often have a hard time of it in contests with Yong Sun at school and county games in the past. Sometimes, she would win and other times lose the game to her. Yong Ok, however, concealing her inner feelings, held Yong Sun's hand beamingly for a good while. Tall and chubby, she looked kindly at Yong Sun who was still lovely as in her early days. She cracked a joke, "You girl of unyielding spirit, you've come trailing after me again. Well, you know my heart beats quick when I stand face to face against you in a contest from our schooldays."

"Because you often lose games to me."

"That's right. But this time I hope we shan't stand opposite to each other in the finals."

"Let's see how things will shape up."

"So, you mean to come up to the finals? You're headlong as ever."

They parted, and kept coming up by playing matches according to the schedule of tournament. But Yong Sun was eliminated from the tournament, beaten in the quarter-finals by Cha Kyong Mi who was the table-tennis champion for several years.

When Pak and her team returned to the sports club a senior official of the club asked Pak's coach Hwang Kon Dong, "What do you think Pak lacks, Kon Dong?"

"I'm afraid," Kong Dong replied, "she is too young to be patient in the games. I think her weakest point is that she lacks the resolution to fight it out to the last point."

The official, making a nod, fell into a deep thought. After a while he told Pak and her coach, "Well, the great leader Comrade Kim Jong Il saw a football match of our players recently and clarified a new principle of contest of our own style. He instructed us to wage vigorously ideological, perseverant, speedy and technical campaigns in sports games. It's completely a new competition method of our own. From now on we should fully implement the requirements of this method in training and matches. I think there'll be some advances in the national championships slated for late September."

"I see," Pak Yong Sun said firmly in high spirits. At that time she was a table-tennis player of the February 8 Sports Club.

Astonishing National Champion

In 1973 the national table-tennis championships was held splendidly at the Pyongyang Indoor Stadium. It drew a large number of teams from across the country. Instructor Ri Ja Chong also came to Pyongyang with his pupils from North

Phyongan Province. After seeing the junior-level tournament, he sat quietly on the seat watching the matches of Pak Yong Sun, Pak Yong Ok, O Yong Suk and Jon Pok Sun.

Unexpectedly, Pak Yong Sun won all matches with players from other provinces and the capital, and advanced to the finals, beating off O Yong Suk from the Amnokgang Sports Club in the semifinals. Seeing the matches of his former pupils, Ri could hardly contain his excitement.

When Pak Yong Ok saw Yong Sun in the finals, she was somewhat confused, opening her eyes wide in astonishment. Yong Ok's coach Kim Hong Gi knitted his brows when he saw Yong Sun, a girl of sturdy build. (Yong Sun, walking out after her coach Hwang Kon Dong, looked confident.)

In 1968, Yong Sun at the age of 12 won third place in the junior-level contest of the national games. She visited the Amnokgang Sports Club and requested to be accepted into it, saying she would be glad to be with Pak Yong Ok and O Yong Suk. But her wish was not fulfilled. So, Kim Hong Gi now thought if Yong Sun had joined their sports club at that time, Yong Ok would not have to confront her this time, and that either of them could be the winner to add to his success. He earnestly prayed for Yong Ok coming off the winner that day.

The stadium was overcrowded with audience and experts, and they watched the match between Yong Ok and Yong Sun with great interest. As the two players were well aware of

each other's merits and demerits, it was a close game, each now ahead and now behind with the gap of one or two points. Yong Ok was high-spirited at first, but she became impatient and over-strained in the end of the first round of match, losing the game by 18 to 21. The audience was struck with wonder at young Yong Sun's success of her last lightning drive, giving her big applause.

Pale with worry, Kim Hong Gi shouted to Yong Ok, "Be patient and cool in passing the balls. Your hand shakes when you hit the ball. Strike the ball two ways, left and right."

Yong Sun's coach Hwang Kon Dong also called out telling her to keep up her spirits and continue with attack; he refrained from further advices because she played well, better than expected.

In the second round the two had a seesaw match. Yong Sun seemed to be excited and her last strokes fell out of the table. She lost the game by 20 to 22. In the third round Pak Yong Sun won by 21 to 19 with her smart drives. In the fourth round Kim Hong Gi kept shouting to Yong Ok in a fret, "Strike right!" Yong Sun seemed weak in the right-side defence, and began to lose points. Her right-side counterattack was not correct and the ball missed the table. Anxious to recover the lost score, she started to do rash left-hand drives. Almost half her strikes failed because of her whim and impatience, and she lost the fourth round of the game.

Before the fifth round, Hwang advised Yong Sun, "You grow fitful again. That makes you impatient. This is the last round. Brace up and don't get excited. Hold out and do good defence."

Yong Sun's left drives succeeded one after another. But she seemed to be less well prepared than Yong Ok mentally and physically, and she made errors in the end, losing the game by the score of 18 to 21. Though she mounted the platform as the runner-up, she showed no sign of disappointment. She was confident that she could beat Yong Ok next time.

In April the next year Yong Sun advanced again to the finals in the Mangyongdae Prize Games and snatched the title of champion at last. This time Pak Yong Ok was unable to cope with Yong Sun's powerful and quick drives. The coaches and players of the February 8 Sports Club shouted for joy, their cries resounding through the indoor stadium. "Pak Yong Sun has won the national games!"

Yong Ok, grasping Yong Sun by the hand, said warmly, "Congratulations! But you don't know yet who will be the first to be the Asian or world champion—you or I. I know I'm going to win international matches even defeating you."

"I'm ready to accept your challenge," Yong Sun replied daringly.

Yong Sun's victory in the Mangyongdae prize contest caused a great sensation in the country's table-tennis circle

just as the DPRK championship of Pak Yong Ok did. When the match between Yong Sun and Yong Ok finished, Ri Ja Chong ran down to the stadium's lobby in a flurry as if he were out of his mind. As he came down to the floor, Yong Sun and Yong Ok recognized him. Yong Sun ran towards and greeted him, "Master, how are you?" Yong Ok also did her manners to him, "You have come again!"

"I've watched your match. I've been deeply impressed, so I came down in haste. Yong Sun, congratulations for your win in the national tournament! Seeing your match, I thought you've made further progress. It's really surprising." With deep emotion, Ri embraced both of them.

A man feels proud and happy when he has done something good for society and the people. In excitement Ri Ja Chong looked back on the past days when he trained and reared the girls, his pupils, into sports champions.

Left-handed Children's Union Sub-branch Chairwoman

When the movement for running sports circles in schools started across the country, Ri Ja Chong had a special interest in it with enthusiasm. With a desire to run the table-tennis circle, he volunteered to become sports teacher of the Namsa

Middle School in a mountainous village of Sakju County by the Amnok River after graduating from the Sinuiju Teachers Training College.

First of all, he set out to select players in his own way. From among the third-grade students, he picked out left-handed Children's Union activists. There arose responses of different sorts to his method of selecting players. Some teachers and students raised an objection, but left-handed girls interested in table tennis were eager to join the circle. One of them was Pak Yong Sun, a lovely girl with a round face and sharp eyes. An older girl Yong Ok who was taller and agile-looking came with Yong Sun under the lead of O Yong Suk (the first to be picked by Ri). Both Yong Ok and Yong Sun introduced themselves as left-handed, hoping to be admitted into the table tennis team of the school.

Looking Yong Sun up and down, Ri said sullenly, "You're too short." To this Yong Sun muttered her reply, with her big eyes sparkling, "I think there are children who grow taller late."

Ri was struck dumb by her daring retort. He thought *she was right*. Then she went on, "Well, I'm an activist of the Children's Union sub-branch and behind nobody in study in my class." *So, she already knows I'm selecting Children's Union activists and excellent students*, Ri thought to himself. "Oh, yes! So, you're Pak Yong Sun who is sub-branch chairwoman

and a model student. Good. If your teacher has no objection, I'll accept you." "Thank you, sir."

Now Pak Yong Ok came forward. Actually she was right-handed, but she said she was left-handed.

"Do you mean what you say?" Ri asked.

"Yes. I can use both hands," replied Yong Ok.

"Very good. You two come to the circle from tomorrow."

Pak Yong Sun went to her teacher right way. When her teacher heard that Yong Sun was going to join the table-tennis circle, she was surprised and objected to it, saying sternly, "You know the work of the chairwoman of the Children's Union sub-branch is more important to you, and what's the use of joining a sports circle when you're well up in your lessons?"

"But I want to be good at everything," she insisted.

"That's a flippant idea!"

Yong Sun thought it was no use arguing any more with her teacher.

The next day the vice head of the school called Ri.

"How are things going on in your circle?" the vice head asked.

"Going on well because of the school's backing. But some teachers cause trouble by refusing to give me the students of my choice."

"Who are the students?"

"Pak Yong Sun and other eligible students aren't allowed

to join the circle for various reasons. One of them is not permitted to come to us because she is the leader of the Children's Union sub-branch. I think it's unjust."

"Their teachers must have some reasons of their own. All right, I'll see to that. Now, I've heard you only accept left-handed children or members of the Children's Union sub-branch committee. Is that true?"

"Yes, that's true."

"What's the reason? Is there any scientific justification that left-handed persons are better fitted for sport?"

"I once read a book that said most of the left-handed students are clever and have better physical ability. That's why I'm admitting such children to the circle."

"You mean you've chosen Yong Sun for that reason."

"No, I haven't picked her out; she came to me by herself. In general, it is true that those who volunteer to do sports are better suited for it."

The vice headmaster advised Ri kindly with a generous smile, "Your motive is good. But the movement for running sports circles is a mass sports activity. It is advisable to accept all students who are eager to play table tennis."

This was how Yong Sun became a member of the table-tennis circle. Ri's concern for Yong Sun was great. When she came to the physical training room for the first time, he asked her, "Yong Sun, take a penholder grip of the racket, and then

a shake-hand grip." He taught her how to grip the bat by his own hand movement.

"Listen to me. All of you take grips of the racket in two ways, and choose the convenient one. Yong Sun, how about you?"

"I like this one."

"Then you train with the left-handed penholder grip. And now, Yong Ok, what's your choice?"

"Mr Ri, I'm actually right-handed, but as I can play with the left hand, I told you I'm left-handed. May I not play with the right hand?"

"Why not?" Ri replied with a smile. "As you can play with both hands, you can take the initiative in matches."

"I see. I'll do as you tell me," said Yong Ok with pleasure.

"So, you three including O Yong Suk are all left-handed penholder-grip players. Well, from now, you compete with one another to see who is the best," Ri concluded. He had an exceptional liking for the three girls. He was determined to train them by means of competition. Consequently, the three girls became rivals to each other.

As soon as the morning class was over, they came to the physical training room. With each passing day they made rapid progress in games. Ri made strenuous effort to let them master exact skills of serving, forehand stroke and drive as early as possible. He had an urge to train them quickly to

make them fit enough to participate in the annual table tennis contests of schools in the county.

Advancing through Competition

With an unremitting zeal and fortitude Pak Yong Sun strove hard in training till late at night without noticing the lapse of time. With a determination to overtake her two rivals, she endeavoured to get more personal guidance from Ri, showing great zest in training. Other members of the table-tennis circle looked at Yong Sun amazingly and followed suit, oblivious of break and fatigue. This called forth acute wordless competition between all of them.

Ri Ja Chong saw to giving impartial individual guidance to everyone in consideration of their wishes and mentality. Their enthusiasm and spirits soared day after day, resulting in rapid improvement in their skills. In the New Year the county office gave notice that sports events would be held during the school vacation in August. In preparations for it, Ri organized league matches of all students for a test game. Then he formed teams of boys and girls with those winning fifth place and upward in the matches and gave them hard training by means of competition.

August came. At the sports games sponsored by the county administration office, the table-tennis players of the Namsa

Middle School registered great successes; they won first place in girls' team event and snatched first, second and third prizes in singles. With this, they were qualified for participation in the provincial games slated for the winter vacation in December at the Sinuiju Stadium. But as this was their debut in the provincial games, they took third places in all events. In August the next year, however, the girls of the school participated in the provincial games again as representatives of the county, winning first place by beating off the Sinuiju team in the finals. And Pak Yong Ok, O Yong Suk and Pak Yong Sun won first, second and third places respectively in girls' singles.

The table-tennis coaches from the central sports clubs who were there to select reserve players were astonished at the matches played by the students of the Namsa Middle School. Kim Hui Jin of the February 8 Sports Club called on Ri Ja Chong and said that Pak Yong Sun caught his fancy, and that he would come for her in one or two years, asking Ri to train her and prefect her driving skills. Coach Kim Hong Gi of the Amnokgang Sports Club took away Pak Yong Ok and O Yong Suk immediately.

Ri Ja Chong had never expected that his pupils would be taken away to the sports clubs so early. He was very pleased and became full of self-confidence. But on the other hand, he was worried if his pupils would meet the expectations of the central sports clubs.

Pak Yong Sun spent longer hours than before in training herself. Ri devoted his all to improving her skills of left-handed drive. Driving skill was Ri's forte. So, he trained her with confidence to round off her driving tricks.

In April 1968 a provincial qualifier contest was held in Sinuiju City for the National Games. Representing Sakju County, Pak Yong Sun was chosen to participate in the junior-level table-tennis tournament in the amateur sector. Under Ri Ja Chong's meticulous guidance she won first place in the women's singles against all odds. So she qualified for the National Games as a member of the provincial women's junior-level table-tennis team.

In early August that year she came to Pyongyang with Ri Ja Chong for the first time in her life. Arriving at the Pyongyang Station she fell into rapture, marvelling at the beautiful and modern streets of the capital city, which was in a festive atmosphere as the 20th founding anniversary of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was just around the corner.

The National Games took place at different stadiums and gymnasiums. As Yong Sun had little experience in nationwide contest, she was so strained that she reached the semifinals to finish third in the event. Still, Ri Ja Chong and players and coaches of the North Phyongan provincial team congratulated her warmly for her bronze medal. Coaches of the A-class sports clubs in Pyongyang asked for her name and address

jotting them in their notebooks, while seeing her matches. They thought they could enlist her in their teams respectively. Coach Paek Ok Hi of the then Moranbong Sports Club came up to Ri before anyone else after the game finished, and took Ja Chong and Yong Sun to his team.

Ja Chong felt like to let Pak Yong Sun be enlisted by any central sports clubs, availing themselves of the visit to Pyongyang. So he went to the Moranbong Sports Club with Pak, led by Paek. But the team's chief coach and deputy head in charge of technical affairs refused to accept her, saying that she was too young. They asked Pak to come a few years later. This meant their refusal to admit her. At the Kigwancha Sports Club, too, they disapproved her for the same reason after their invitation. To their eyes she was a small, young country girl. Now that Ri suffered two failures, he did not dare to visit the then February 8 Sports Club. He was afraid that another failure would hurt the heart of young Yong Sun. In that case Pak might lose her confidence and give up playing table tennis.

When they returned to their hotel to make preparations for return home, coach Kim Hong Gi sent Pak Yong Ok and O Yong Suk to them unexpectedly to invite them to his sports club. Ri was glad to see Yong Ok and Yong Suk, and followed them together with Pak Yong Sun. Kim Hong Gi had an underhand plan to get Yong Sun join his Amnokgang Sports Club by mobilizing Yong Ok and Yong Suk. Yong Sun agreed

on their proposal, preferring to stay with her old senior fellows.

Then Ri Ja Chong had a contradictory thought. He did not want to leave his trainees in one and the same sports club to be rivals. To him it was obvious that if Yong Sun joined the Amnokgang club, she might fail to have proper training guidance overwhelmed by Yong Ok and Yong Suk: she might be too unimportant to participate even in major domestic contests. It was most likely that she would be out of concern of coaches, which meant her ability might be neglected in the long run. Half in doubt about Kim Hong Gi's request Ri said that he would discuss the matter of Pak's admission later. His heart broke when he took Yong Sun out of the sports club against her will who was crestfallen. But persuading her resolutely he came back to Chongsu with her by train.

When Ri Ja Chong and Pak Yong Sun showed up at the school the next day, Ri was informed of a telephone call from the provincial sports club that demanded he send Yong Sun to the club. Meanwhile, when Ri went to see the headmaster in his office, he said that Coach Kim Hui Jin of the February 8 Sports Club had come for Yong Sun, waiting for him in the town hotel. Kim had been unable to get in touch with Ri, because he had spent so many hours to gain senior organ's approval for admitting Yong Sun. Immediately, Ri ran to the

hotel to have an impressive meeting with Kim. And finally, Pak Yong Sun was admitted to the February 8 Sports Club.

In Youth

In May 1974 Pak Yong Sun snatched gold medal in the women's singles at the China international table tennis invitation tournament of five nations, causing a great sensation. And in the team event her team including Pak Yong Ok, Kim Chang Ae and O Yong Suk won second place. This was the first brilliant success registered by the Korean players in the international table-tennis arena. The mass media of the DPRK featured it, giving pleasure to the whole nation.

The Korean women players' win at the international competitions had a great impact on the international table-tennis circle. Japan's Jiji Press reported as follows: "Recently Japan's myth of dominance in table tennis has started to break with the advent of the women players of the DPRK. The Koreans have emerged as an imposing rival to Japan's players. It is necessary to pay attention to the Koreans who are posing as fearful opponents of top players of Japan and China." And China's Xinhua news agency said that the recent championships were the theatre of confrontation between the Japanese players who were going downhill and the DPRK in their uphill struggle.

The DPRK women's team continued to appear in international competitions. But an unexpected thing happened: Pak Yong Ok, Pak Yong Sun and other players failed to mount the dais of honour at the 2nd Asian Table Tennis Championships held in Yokohama, Japan. Noticing her weak points that had surfaced in the international matches, Yong Sun trained hard and defeated Yong Ok at the DPRK Championships that year to become the national champion.

At the 7th Asian Games Pak Yong Sun and other players of the national women's table tennis team failed to attain their target again, only bagging silver and bronze medals.

Pak Yong Sun decided that her defeat in the match was directly attributable to her lack of physical strength in the fifth round. As a result, she couldn't identify the true cause of her loss. Dispirited, she entered the training ground with a gloomy look. Reading her mind Hwang Kon Dong took her to his room and said, "As I have told you, you lost the match because you didn't manage the match with mental fortitude and determination. And I am afraid you try to ascribe your loss only to technical problems. This is because you have turned ideologically dull as you have indulged in praises from the public. You're also wrong when you didn't accept criticism of others open-mindedly as you are too much attached to your self-respect and obstinacy. When you rectify those points, then you can improve your skill and win matches. I hope you

would have a careful thought. Well, you are dismissed."

Now Pak took a new turn. After she trained hard till late evening, she did running exercises perseveringly at night or early in the morning. In the days she fell more than once due to stomach cramps and cramps in her legs. But she set her teeth and endured the difficulties of training, fulfilling various tasks of hard training set by Hwang Kon Dong. Her attitude was quite pleasing.

One snowy morning when 1974 was drawing to a close a written instruction came from the then Physical Culture and Sports Guidance Committee of Korea to the February 8 Sports Club. According to the instruction coaches Hwang Kon Dong and Kang Nung Ha, and players Jo Yong Ho and Pak Yong Sun were summoned to join the national team's training for the preparation of the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships in 1975.

Pak couldn't hold her excitement. Hwang Kon Dong and Kim Hui Jin took charge of the women's team while Kang Nung Ha was put in charge of the men's team. The general training went full-steam ahead under the supervision of the table tennis association. Kim Hui Jin set a high target of training so that the players could hardly overcome the limits of their physical ability unless they had the self-sacrificing spirit, and pushed ahead with it boldly. He put much emphasis on perfecting Yong Sun's drive, Cha Kyong Mi's slice and

Pak Yong Ok's forehand stroke to make them their tactical and technical fortes while frequently organizing matches between themselves.

The training was intensive, perhaps too much for the players to bear. And yet Pak Yong Sun managed to overcome moments of hard training and, more than that, she tenaciously ran 4 km every morning as part of her physical training.

At the end of January 1975 the DPRK's table tennis team, consisting of Son Kil Chon and Kim Pyong Gon as its head and deputy head respectively, coaches Kang Nung Ha and Kim Hui Jin, and players Pak Yong Sun, Jo Yong Ho and Yun Chol, left Pyongyang Airport for the championships. When their airplane reached the sky over the Amnok River, Pak Yong Sun addressed Kim Hui Jin, "Mr. Coach, look out of the window. We can see the Amnok River. That is Sakju County where I come from."

Raising his backrest Kim looked down at what Yong Sun was pointing to. "Right," he agreed. With a nod, he wore an expressive smile. Pak took out her handkerchief to wipe tears that welled up in her eyes unawares. Reading her excited mind Kim said to her to calm down, "It is very good not to forget your native home, teachers, friends and parents. When I was in your hometown Sakju, all of them were pleased that you were admitted to the sports club of the army. And they asked me to train you as a table tennis ace without fail. How

kind-hearted they are! We should live up to their expectations this time."

"Sure," she said courageously. Keeping the receding sky of the motherland in their mind, they made up their determination once more to win the championships.

The plane flied through Southeast Asian countries and, finally, arrived in Calcutta in eastern India. Calcutta, the venue of the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships, was a port city located on the Hooghly River that discharges into the Bay of Bengal. Landing at the international airport in the northern suburb of the city, the DPRK's table tennis team was received by the chief secretary of the Indian Table Tennis Association, and ushered to a hotel in downtown. It was a tourist deluxe hotel where the participating teams checked in. Several teams of different countries had already arrived there, having their own training. The indoor stadium, a training-cum-game venue of the championships, was not so far from the hotel, so it was convenient for the players.

As it was a tropical climate the fragrance of flowers wafted in the street, which was a clear indication of the advent of spring though it was late January. From the next day the DPRK players went to the stadium to have warm-up training. Kim Hui Jin and Song Tok Bong—who had already been in the country as table tennis advisor—became Pak Yong Sun's opponents, making a scrupulous arrangement for her to deal

with offensives and counterstrokes from her world-famous rivals. Kim prepared Pak Yong Sun against offensives based on forehand stroke and drive while Song further trained Pak's drive with his forte of shake-hand grip-based slicing defence. Song's slicing defence and sudden forehand stroke were similar to the methods of the winners of the previous championships, Alexandru of Romania and Jong Hyon Suk of south Korea, so they turned out to be much helpful to Pak's preparation.

On February 6, five days after the DPRK team's arrival, the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships opened in the indoor stadium crowded with spectators. The opening ceremony was attended by over 100 players from scores of countries. The DPRK players and coaches made a round proudly, flying the national flag and holding the signboard of the nationality.

Daring Goal

The championships began with the team event in which the Chinese team won the gold medal. The Chinese women players who participated in the women's team event also took part in the singles which meant they were all opponents of Pak Yong Sun. The south Korean and Japanese players were also far from those Pak could beat with ease. Formidable world aces were there to challenge Pak.

It was sultry in the stadium as it was 40℃ outside, and Kim Hui Jin thought it was over 33℃ inside.

Pak Yong Sun approached the table. When a tall French player saw Pak at first she seemed confident, for she thought Pak was a novice. The French was the national champion, and an experienced defender with a long career, who had won the women's doubles at the European championships. From the start the French, underestimating that Pak, a girl of small stature, was a newcomer, tried to take the initiative in the match while combining slice and strike. She, however, was discouraged by Pak's accurate and powerful defence. She was confused when she lost scores at Pak's counterstroke.

Now she was mentally disturbed. She usually found it difficult to have a game with Asian players, so when Pak concentrated her strike on the right with high balls, she was at a loss how to tackle it, going over to the defensive. Pak won the first round 21-14.

In the second round Pak felt easier and more confident. The French opponent failed to cope with Pak's twist, losing the game 10-21. In the third round Pak's powerful drive against the French player's defence continued. In desperation, the French ventured to change her tactics; she abandoned defence and started forehand stroke in left and right sides in turn. She, however, couldn't cope with Pak's deliberate counterstroke and perseverant drive-based

defence. She lost scores one after another, and lost the round 13-21. At last, the match ended in favour of Pak with the score of 3-nil.

In the afternoon Pak went to the indoor stadium to have another match at five o'clock. Her opponent was a Hungarian. The Hungarian was already in the stadium doing warm-up exercise. When Pak stepped in, she glared at Pak in an attempt to launch a war of nerves and disturb her opponent's mental condition. But her eyes betrayed anxiety as well as aggressiveness. As she had once won the European championships, she was determined to snatch the championship. She was a shake-hand grip player, but her forte was to make offensive using left and right drive.

Pak was also a player of offensive style, so it was a close match. The Hungarian, too, took the offensive actively. Short and sturdy, she made drives from either the left or right, her eyes open sharp and straight. Pak, however, made the most of her forte, carrying on counterstrokes with powerful drives. Finally she won, beating her rival in the fifth round to qualify for the quarterfinal.

Having won the quarterfinal which took nearly two hours, Pak Yong Sun won the semifinal against a player of the former Soviet Union, thus qualifying for the final. Her final rival was Zhang Li, the top seed of the Chinese team. She was a left-handed penholder-grip player like Pak, and pushing ball

was Zhang's forte. When Pak's forte was drive, Zhang was fond of fast attack.

The indoor stadium, the venue of the finals, was crowded with spectators. Outside the stadium was also a throng of table tennis fans. Reporters from a lot of countries were busy with live broadcasting and news coverage. Ministers and other officials of the Indian government and the chairman of the International Table Tennis Federation and other directors of the federation appeared in the stadium. On the spacious floor there was only one table because there were left men's and women's singles and doubles finals alone. When Pak Yong Sun and Zhang Li appeared for the women's single final, the venue roared with thunderous applause and cheers.

The match began. Pak, experiencing the bubbling atmosphere of the final of the world championships for the first time, felt rather nervous. At first Pak made a twist-top spin serve, her left hand quivering a little, and attacked her opponent by forehand stroke. Then, Zhang Li sent the ball back by pushing it swiftly. Zhang made scores with quick-push counterattack while making returns for Pak's drive. On the contrary, Pak made scores by throwing powerful drives to Zhang's right side whenever opportunities presented themselves. It was quite a close game, the scores being 9-10, 14-16 and 18-18.

The members of the cheering parties were shouting

"bravo!" enthusiastically, their hands wet with sweat. Pak, with courage, sent the ball to the centre of Zhang's side by forehand strike. Zhang, however, speedily pushed the ball back. In the first round Pak lost the game though she was high-spirited. Nevertheless, there was little sign of disappointment and hesitation about Pak. Rather, her face was full of confidence. Kim Hui Jin who knew well about her was not pessimistic, either. Kim and Pak made a preparation for the second round with confidence in victory. During the break Kim said to Pak to calm down, "Take it easy, do just as you like. The second round will surely be in favour of you."

As Pak felt very calm, her drives and forehand strokes were carried out accurately. Using Zhang's weak point of concentrating on defence in the right Pak made scores by making sudden strikes in the left and right alternately. Her loud shout of *yat* started at last. She made twist-top spin serves as well as long drive strikes, which brought her scores. Zhang was engrossed in defence, trying to catch up helter-skelter. But Pak's score advanced overwhelmingly. Finally, Zhang seemed to be giving up the second round. Pak was in higher spirit. As a result, she won the game 21-12.

In the third round Zhang looked determined to win the game. But Pak looked more confident. From the beginning of the third round she began to demonstrate her ability to the

full. She made scores by hitting the ball correctly which was high up in the air after her backhand serve. Her shouts of *yat* were heard more frequently, getting on Zhang's nerves, for Zhang didn't deal with the ball properly whenever Pak shouted. She tried to send back the balls which were hit by Pak in different ways but in vain in the end. In the third round, too, Pak Yong Sun won the game 21-14.

Now Pak was full of confidence and spiritual strength that she could finish the final in the fourth round. Her spiritual strength was the key factor of her success. She entered the fourth round of match in a confident manner. On the contrary, Zhang Li looked discouraged already. Pak took the initiative in the game and launched daring offensives using her forte. Sometimes Zhang Li tried to boost her morale by doing drive-based defence and bold pushes. She, however, could not cope with Pak's different drives and powerful forehand strokes. When her pushes turned out to be futile several times, she made mistakes repeatedly as if she lost her confidence. She began to be engrossed in passive defence. Indeed, she lost her confidence.

Availing herself of this opportunity, Pak made more powerful drives frequently, striking fierce blows to Zhang's right side. Zhang, confused, failed to check the attack. With two scores left, Zhang made a desperate effort to recover from her failures by perfect defence and correct strike, but she was

soundly defeated in the fourth round. Surrounding Pak who won the final 3-1 in total, reporters competed to hold out cameras and microphones. A PTI reporter asked Pak first, "I'd appreciate it if you tell me your feelings as champion."

Excited, Pak said in a hoarse voice, "Words fail me to express my delight of victory today. I feel such an ecstasy for the first time in my life, because I have prepared a gift of victory for our great leader Comrade Kim Jong Il on his birthday, the greatest holiday of our people. I have now realized my wish I've kept in my mind from schooldays."

Hot tears ran down her cheeks unawares. Next, a UPI reporter asked, "What do you think has brought your victory?" Calming her emotion for a while of thinking, she replied, "I think my victory today is the result of my struggle. I have played each match with a yearning for our people's great leader Comrade Kim Jong Il who taught us the competing methods of waging ideological, speedy, perseverant and technical campaigns."

Before she could finish her answer, there was another question.

"I'm a *Times of India* journalist. At decisive moments you made a hard stroke in an instant while shouting '*yat!*' in a unique voice, and what does it mean?"

Smiling beautifully Pak thought how to explain it. Then

Kim Hui Jin who was standing by answered, "'*Yat!*' means 'success' or 'I've got it.' In other words, it is one of her interjections to encourage herself and beat her opponent mentally."

"Oh, I see. Thank you very much."

There happened the grand awarding ceremony. Amidst the playing of *Patriotic Song*, the national flag of the DPRK was hoisted. Pak Yong Sun mounted the top stage of the platform, and the chairman of the International Table Tennis Federation, with a bright smile on his face, conferred the gold medal of the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships and a trophy on her. In the evening a closing dinner party was held. The deputy Prime Minister of India conferred the crown and belt, the top awards of the championships, on her, breaking the custom of the International Table Tennis Championships.

One day in early March 1975, several days after the welcome-home party was given in honour of Pak Yong Sun's world championship at the People's Palace of Culture, the director of the sports club hurried to the training ground to tell Pak that she was called in by the great leader Comrade Kim Jong Il.

Pak, calming down her excitement with difficulty, went to see him with a bunch of flowers, the gold medal, trophy, crown and belt she had received at the 33rd World Table Tennis Championships. She presented the fragrant flowers to the leader in the name of her sports club. Seeing her trophy and gold

medal Kim Jong Il was very pleased, and asked her to put on the crown and belt. Then he posed for a souvenir photograph with her.

A few days later Pak Yong Sun had the highest honour of meeting President Kim Il Sung with some leading staff of the sports club, and Kim Hui Jin, Son Kil Chon and Kang Nung Ha were also present there. On hearing of their arrival, the President put aside his work to receive them. Shaking their hands warmly the President said kindly that he had made time intentionally to see Pak Yong Sun, having heard of Pak's return home as world champion. He asked Pak how old she was and where she went to school. Then he praised her highly, saying that she had performed a great feat that time. And he asked her about the championships.

Attracted by his kind-heartedness she told about the whole process of matches without reserve.

Son Kil Chon, head of the delegation to the world championships, stood up and told the President that Pak had concluded almost all matches, including the quarterfinal, in the fifth round, and that sometimes she had fought unyieldingly to the last one point even when she was five points behind—thus winning all the matches.

The President said that it was the anti-Japanese guerrilla army-style fighting whereby they had fought to the last man. He continued to say that he was pleased with her indomitable

fighting spirit, and that fighting to the last persistently was her merit. Then he added that with that fighting spirit one can beat any rival, and that as she had had such a good spirit she had become the world table tennis queen. Calling Pak to his side he put a watch on her wrist as gift. Now he asked her to put on the gold medal, trophy, crown and belt, and had a souvenir photo taken with her, as well as with Son Kil Chon, coaches Kim Hui Jin and Kang Nung Ha.

In late March 1977 the DPRK table tennis team arrived at Birmingham, the venue of the 34th World Table Tennis Championships. The city was known as a hub of the British industry and commerce. On March 26, the opening ceremony of the championships was held with a large attendance. The championships began with men's and women's team events, and the women's team of the DPRK came third for the first time at the world championships with the score of winning seven of the eight matches. That was the target they had set before leaving their country.

The next day the women's singles began, attracting nearly 100 excellent players. Pak Yong Sun beat off the British and Romanian opponents soundly to be qualified for the quarterfinals. The quarterfinal matches were fought between the world aces from the DPRK, Sweden, China, former Soviet Union, Japan, France and south Korea. They were all spectacular.

The experts and journalists from different countries watched the match between Pak Yong Sun and Zhou Xiangyun of China attentively. Pak's drive was distinctive and unique, and her match was somewhat oriented to speed campaign and bold offensive, commanding special public favour. A lot of people including journalists, experts and amateurs photographed the match intensively. The match between Pak and Zhou was the world-famous exhibition of women's table tennis. Their different methods of strike and defence struck the audience with admiration. The difference in scores was no greater than two points. But Pak won each round.

When the third round came to an end, Zhou, shaking Pak's hand, said, "You're really the world champion. You've used your forte very well—I admit it. I've learned much from you. But Ge Xinai will revenge me."

Pak Yong Sun replied daringly, "No, not at all."

Ge was one of the best Chinese players. As she mastered various technical skills like drive, cut and push, she was a formidable opponent to Pak. Earlier Pak had had several matches with Ge at international invitation tournaments in China and the Asian Games. Each of the games was very close to the fifth round; sometimes she won, and sometimes she lost. The coach of the Chinese women's team had decided to make Ge become a world champion this time in view of the fact that Zhang Li had failed to win the last championships.

Consequently, it was a decisive match; if Ge won the game, she would be a new world champion, and on the contrary if Pak won, she would become a twice world table tennis queen.

Pak Yong Sun cornered Ge into psychological impatience with the tactics of securing superiority in scores to make her give up the match in the long run. At last Pak defeated Ge. Finally she had to play the final match with Zhang Li who came to the final from the other group.

On April 5 the final matches of singles and doubles of the 34th World Table Tennis Championships were held with splendour. Pak Yong Sun and Zhang Li entered the final. Tens of thousands of spectators watched the game with bated breath. Pak who knew well about Zhang's technical and tactical methods as well as her demerits, didn't yield from the first round. In the first and second rounds Pak won the game 21-15 and 21-19. When the score was 20-21 in the third round, Zhang Li, who was one point behind, was engrossed in defence. After spin serve Pak, however, made a powerful drive towards Zhang's right side with the shout of *yat!* The ball grazed the edge of the table, and Zhang could not send the ball back. The gymnasium roared with thunderous cheers and applause. Now Pak Yong Sun became the twice world champion at last.

Later, even when she became mother, she devoted all her wisdom and zeal to the work of training reserve players as

coach, living up to her honour of People's Athlete in military uniform.

Unfortunately she caught an incurable disease and died too young at the age of 31. Though she was short-lived, the traces she left in the table tennis world still remain vivid. Chairman Kim Jong Il saw to it that Pak Yong Sun, who had added glory to the motherland by winning the world table tennis championships, was placed in the Patriotic Martyrs Cemetery so that she enjoyed an eternal life. The memory of Pak Yong Sun, twice world table tennis champion and Labour Hero of the DPRK, is alive in the heart of the Korean people as an immortal youth under the care of the Workers' Party of Korea.

(*The end*)

Table Tennis Queen in Living Memory

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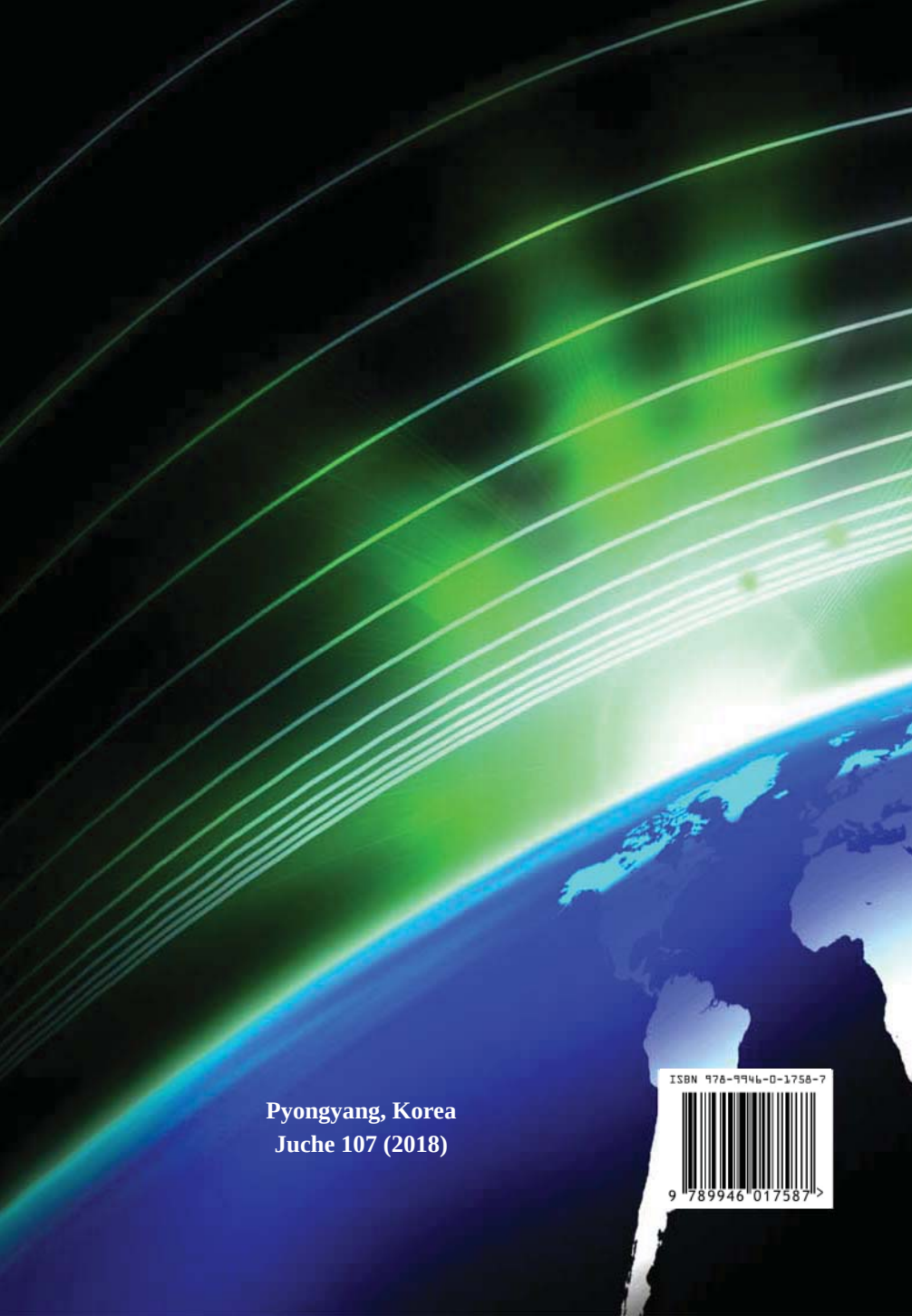

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